

Whatever the Problem, It's Probably Solved by Walking



Credit...Pierre Buttin

By Andrew McCarthy March 25, 2023 NYT

Walking is the worst-kept secret I know. Its rewards hide under every step.

Perhaps because we take walking so much for granted, many of us often ignore its ample gifts. In truth, I doubt I would walk often or very far if its sole benefit was physical, despite the abundant proof of its value in that regard. There's something else at play in walking that interests me more. And with the arrival of spring, attention must be paid.

I discovered the power of ambling more than a quarter century ago when I traipsed 500 miles across Spain on the Camino de Santiago, an ancient pilgrimage route. I stumbled upon the Camino by accident and then trudged across Spain with purpose. I've been a walker ever since. And I'm not the only one.

Hippocrates proclaimed that "walking is man's best medicine." The good doctor also knew that walking provided more than mere physical benefits when he

suggested: “If you are in a bad mood, go for a walk. If you are still in a bad mood, go for another walk.” He was alluding to what so many who came after would attest, that walking not only nourishes the body but also soothes the mind while it burns off tension and makes our troubles recede into a more manageable perspective.

Soren Kierkegaard agreed when he confessed, “I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it.” And Charles Dickens was even more direct. “If I could not walk far and fast,” he wrote, “I think I should just explode and perish.”

But walking does more than keep the devil from the door. The Welsh poet (and sometime vagabond) W.H. Davies wrote:

Now shall I walk
Or shall I ride?
“Ride,” Pleasure said.
“Walk,” Joy replied.

Walking buoys the spirits in a way that feels real and earned. It feels owned. And walking, like a generous partner, meets us more than halfway.

There’s abundant testimony that a good ramble fuels creativity. William Wordsworth swore by walking, as did Virginia Woolf. So did William Blake. Thomas Mann assured us, “Thoughts come clearly while one walks.” J.K. Rowling observed that there is “nothing like a nighttime stroll to give you ideas,” while the turn-of-the-20th-century novelist Elizabeth von Arnim concluded that walking “is the perfect way of moving if you want to see into the life of things.”

And ask any deep thinker about the benefits of what Bill Bryson calls the “tranquil tedium” walking elicits. Jean-Jacques Rousseau admitted, “There is something about walking that animates and activates my ideas.” Even the resolutely pessimistic Friedrich Nietzsche had to give it up for a good saunter when he allowed, “All truly great thoughts are conceived while walking.”

While my own ruminations may not approach the lofty heights to which Nietzsche referred, a good long walk, or even one not so long, begins to carve out space between my thoughts that allows clarity to rise up through my shoes in a way that no other mode of transport does. The travel writer and scholar Patrick Leigh Fermor put it succinctly when he said, “All horsepower corrupts.”

Until I went to Spain with the sole mission of crossing the country on foot, I often considered walking a waste of my time. The Camino changed that. The monthlong walk revealed me to myself in a way nothing else had — my looping pattern of thinking, my habitual emotion cycles, my fearful nature. The Camino wore down my resistance to seeing myself, and then step after step built me back up. It altered my place in the world.

Instead of viewing walking as simply the slowest way to get somewhere, I grew to see it not only as a means to an end, but as the event itself. And since I walked the Camino for a second time last year with my 19-year-old son, I've come to understand walking as among the most valuable things I can do.

The writer Rebecca Solnit pointed out that walking “is how the body measures itself against the earth.” And through such physical communion, walking offers up its crowning gift by bringing us emotionally, even spiritually, home to ourselves. When on the last day of our walk my son turned to me and said, “Dad, that’s the only ‘10 out of 10’ thing I’ve ever done in my life,” I knew he had arrived not only in Santiago de Compostela, but, more meaningfully, in himself.

The great naturalist John Muir keenly observed, “I only went out for a walk and ... going out, I found, was really going in.” Has anyone ever emerged from ambling through nature for an hour and regretted their improved state of being? Perhaps this is what that dedicated walker Henry David Thoreau was referring to when he wrote, “I took a walk in the woods and came out taller than the trees.”

So the secret is out there. It’s under the leaves on the trail. It’s right there on the sidewalk. Spring has sprung. Lace up.

Andrew McCarthy is a writer and an actor and the author of, most recently, “Walking With Sam: A Father, a Son, and Five Hundred Miles Across Spain.”